A TRACT

ON

THE BEST MODE

OF

EVANGELIZING THE SLAVES

OF THE SOUTH,

IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE POLITY OF THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

BY

A MEMBER OF THE SYNOD OF GEORGIA.

"We hesitate not to affirm that one of the highest and most solemn obligations which rests upon the masters of the South, is, to give to their servants, to the utmost of their ability, free access to the instructions and institutions of the Gospel." DR. THORNWELL.

SAVANNAH:
JOHN M. COOPER & CO., PRINTERS.

1852

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A TRACT.

This Tract is written from no secret dissatisfaction with the decision of the Synod of Georgia, at its late session in Savannah.—Although the author regrets that Synod was not prepared to take higher ground, yet, he considers that the overture was discussed with great sincerity, and with an honest desire to arrive at truth. Much light from the experience of Pastors and of Missionaries both domestic and foreign was cast upon the subject. The discussion must and will do good. It has certainly presented the difficulties in the way of a separate organization, with a force and variety of demonstration, that have seldom been equalled. Yet, something needs to be done on this subject by the Presbyterian Church, which has not yet been done. As a denomination, our influence over the slave population of the South, is exceedingly limited and partial. Whatever may be the cause, the fact is notorious, that while other Sects can count their colored members by thousands and tens of thousands, Presbyterians can scarcely number theirs by units! In very many of our churches, there is not a black communicant; and others have but few. Now why the disparity between our church and other denominations on this subject? Some will say, the colored people have a propensity for immersion as the only mode of Baptism. Others will allege, that the negro being ignorant delights in an excited and fanatical mode of worship. There may be truth in each of these positions. Yet some of the strongest opponents of immersion that we have ever known, were negroes, and many of the most sedate and orderly congregations we have ever seen, have been negroes.—No, it is chiefly the amount of attention and training this people have received from the various denominations, that has fixed the number of communicants in each. Emphatically is it here true, that "they who have sowed sparingly have reaped also sparingly, and they who have sowed bountifully have reaped also bountifully."

The chief difficulty with Presbyterians on this subject is, that their mode of receiving members and administering discipline, is more encumbered and formal, than that of other ecclesiastical bodies.

With Episcopalians it requires but the hands of the Bishop to confirm members. With the Methodists this power is vested in the Preacher or Missionary. Among the Baptists the membership hold the keys, and receive and reject at pleasure. Now, all these denominations can have but little difficulty in organizing colored churches or receiving colored members. But the case is far different with Presbyterians. In our church, between the Minister and the people is the office of Ruling Elder. This office is filled by persons elected by the membership, but ordained by the Minister, or the Minister aided by Elders already in office. These Elders with the Pastor or Evangelist constitute a Session, an ecclesiastical court, that presides over each individual congregation. Although an Evangelist or Missionary may, by the powers vested in him, receive members and organize churches, yet no church is formally constituted and no discipline can be regularly administered, unless a Session be formed. It will readily be perceived, that in many congregations it must often happen, that suitable men for this office can be procured but with great difficulty. Hence many are placed in the office from necessity, who are by no means qualified to discharge its duties. This is true with white congregations. But when we apply our system to the blacks, the evil increases in a tenfold ratio. It would take much time, and much training, to prepare the ordinary negro to fill the office of Ruling Elder. But, there is another difficulty; the office of Ruling Elder is not only perpetual but it connects itself with every church-court known to our polity, from the lowest to the highest. In the Session, the Elders outnumber the Pastors; in the higher courts, they stand upon an equal footing with them. Now, this peculiarity in our church polity, so different from that of other denominations, presents difficulties in the way of organizing churches among the blacks, that exist in no Sister Church. The question with us, then is; and it is one of tremendous import.—*How shall we evangelize the millions of blacks around us, in consistency with our Presbyterian principles?*

On several preliminary grounds we are all agreed. We are agreed, that the *work must be done.* Negroes are immortal beings, and we cannot and dare not let them perish through our neglect.—Though we have done but little, still the conviction is universal, that we *ought* to evangelize this people. We are also agreed as to the difficulty and delicacy of this work. So peculiar is the condition of slaves and their relation to society, that whoever undertakes their evangelization must necessarily find himself in a field, that requires

great wisdom, great caution, and indomitable perseverance. We are also agreed, that in attempting this work nothing should be done to infringe either the laws of the State or the laws of the Church.—Both the civil and ecclesiastical polities must be rigidly observed in this undertaking. We are also agreed in the preservation of that public sentiment, which debars the negro from equal intercourse with the whites in social life. This sentiment is sometimes called a prejudice—but such it need not be. There is a solid and good basis for it, and without it, two such opposite races as the negro and the white could not exist together at all. We are also agreed, that no system of evangelization should be attempted, that would place the negro over the white man, or, on an equality with him. Upon these preliminary grounds, Southern Presbyterians are perfectly agreed. The question which divides them, refers to the *best mode* of conducting a system of evangelization among the blacks, in accordance with the principles of the Confession of Faith.

For the evangelization of the blacks in this country, three methods have been employed. During the infancy of the American colonies, and when but few slaves existed among them, all denominations received African converts into white churches. At this time, no separate organization of the blacks into churches, nor even any distinct buildings for their accommodation were employed. They met with their masters in the same building and sat down with them at the same table of the Lord. This method of evangelization however, is suited only to a state of things in which the slave population is small. Whenever that class of persons increases into an equality with the whites, or outnumbers them, then, either the white congregation must be divided, or the slave part of it set off to itself.

The second mode of evangelization is, to provide separate houses for the blacks, to give them a Preacher to themselves, but to extend over them still the government of the parent church. This method has many and decided advantages over the previous one. Where the slaves are placed in galleries to worship with the whites, they feel themselves addressed by the Preacher in only a secondary sense. The sermon is prepared for the whites, is adapted chiefly to the whites, and sometimes can be understood only by them. Singing too, that part of worship in which negroes seem so much to delight is performed by a white choir, while the lips of the slave are hushed in silence either from his ignorance or want of skill in the tunes sung. These evils are all remedied by providing for the blacks separate houses of worship, and by furnishing them with their own Pastor.

About twenty years since this change was effected in the Midway Congregational Church, in Liberty County. Up to that time, the blacks had always worshipped with the whites in the same building. But when the Rev. C. C. Jones devoted his ministry to the slave population of that County, he introduced the change referred to.—Several plain buildings were erected at suitable localities, and the Missionary, passing from station to station catechised and preached to the people in their own houses of worship. Whenever any of them gave evidence of piety, the Missionary reported the matter to the Congregational Session, which alone had the power to admit members and to exercise discipline. The Presbyterian Church in Macon adopted essentially the same plan in the year 1839. A small building was erected for blacks, and Joseph Williams, a black man and also a slave, was appointed to instruct and exhort them. At the time, but one negro belonged to the Macon Church, and she was a free woman of some character and standing. Such, however, was the popularity of the new African Teacher, and such the influence of a house of worship erected specially for the benefit of the blacks, that from the very first all the seats were crowded with attentive hearers. That church now numbers about one hundred communicants. A similar effort has since been made in Charleston, only on a larger scale. The blacks belonging chiefly to the church of Rev. Dr. Smythe were transferred to the pastoral care of Rev. Mr. Adger, a new building was erected for them and a separate congregation formed. Here, however as in Macon, the Session of the white church exercises jurisdiction over the black.

The members of Synod may not know it, or may have forgotten it, but even these necessary changes were not effected without some difficulty at the time. It was several years before the farmers of Liberty County were led cordially to endorse the new plan. In Macon there was some disturbance made by the officers of the city. And in Charleston also the matter became one requiring a printed defense. All this shows, how exceedingly sensitive southern men are, in relation to all innovations concerning the slave population.—Every change becomes necessarily a matter of time, and must be introduced with prudence and care.

The third mode of evangelizing the blacks, is that of constituting among them a distinct church organization. This has long been done by the Baptist and Methodist churches. So far as we know, too, African churches and chapels are constituted by these denominations in the same way as they are among the whites.—

They have the same sort of government and are equally independent. To place some restraint upon these churches however the civil law in Virginia requires, that the preacher shall in every case be a white man. In Georgia the pastor may be a black man, provided he have the concurrence of three white ministers of his own denomination and an annual license from the civil authorities.*—The law also requires in every such assembly of blacks, the presence of three white persons.

The question of organizing congregations composed wholly of blacks, has just begun to be agitated in the Presbyterian Church.—No such church exists among us at present, and so far as the late action of Synod goes, it is deemed inexpedient to introduce them at any future time. Still, the subject has been for the first time discussed in Synod, and it is destined in various forms to come up hereafter. The writer fully believes that in certain localities such an organization may be found necessary; and that with proper restrictions, it may become exceedingly useful. True the utility of such a change is not as yet palpable to the minds of most of his brethren. They look at it in the midst of fog and haze, and see not clearly, how such a change can be effected without injury to all concerned. Having examined the subject for some fifteen years, the writer has not a doubt, but that the thing is practicable, and that Presbyterianism, notwithstanding its stern polity, may accomplish more in this way (and without any violation of its principles,) for the blacks, than any other form of church polity.

1. It is evident, that the old custom of mixed churches, however useful where the black population is small, is wholly inefficient where that population is large. There are so many and such obvious objections to it, that whatever may be the theories of ministers, or their desires on the subject, the slave population of the South will never yield to it unless compelled to do so by law. How many black persons are there in the Presbyterian churches, for instance, of Augusta, of Athens, of Greensborough, and of Columbus? Probably in some of these cases the answer will be *not one*, in others very few. In Savannah while the separately organized churches among the Baptists and Methodists number some two thousand or more communicants, the Presbyterian church has but *one!* This system cannot and *ought* not to succeed with a slave population so large as that around us. The negroes must have separate places for worship, and if not their own Session at least their own Pastor.

* See Note A.

2. Again, many think, that a separate house without a separate organization, is the better method. This is certainly far preferable to the former and if managed aright, may secure most of the benefits without incurring any of the risks of a distinct organization. There is one defect however, connected with it, that must ever cripple it in its operation among the blacks. This is the want of some intervening agency between the white Session and the people over whom they have the oversight. The duty of Elders is to visit the flock, to kneel around the bed-side of the sick, to counsel the ignorant and doubting, and to exercise a mild but watchful discipline over all. Now, white Elders, especially such as officiate in white churches, will hardly enter upon a work of this sort. True, the Pastor or Missionary may do something of it, still, even he feels a delicacy in entering the kitchens and private dwellings of his people. The agency of some trust-worthy black man is almost indispensible in this case. Himself a negro he is on a footing with his fellows, can enter their apartments without restraint and can confer with them with freedom. The Session in Macon could certainly have done but little for the slave population of that place, save for the efficient agency of the black man, who "labored in word and doctrine."* So in Liberty County, there is not only a black exhorter employed, but a number of other trust-worthy negroes, called watchmen.

3. A distinct organization of churches among the blacks, though apparently connected with some evils, we consider the best mode of accomplishing this work. This organization may be effected in two ways. In our cities, where the black population is dense, and where Missionary and Evangelical labors are so necessary, not only a white Pastor, but a white Session may be given to this people.—Let a number of blacks be organized into a separate church; give them a pastor of their own, but a white man; and then associate with this pastor a bench of white Ruling Elders. This is probably the *very best method*, that has as yet been divised, for the thorough religious training and governing of this people. The advantage of having white Elders all will concede; and the appropriation of these Elders exclusively to the blacks will give an energy to the Session and to the Pastor, which a borrowed or divided Eldership could never impart. And surely, in most of our cities, laymen can be found, who would even rejoice to become Ruling Elders over African churches. We sincerely hope, that should any more

* See Note B.

attempts be made in our cities to build African churches, this mode of organization will be tried. It will comply with the law, which requires the presence of at least three white men, in every assembly of negroes—it will employ some three or four men in an interesting field, who otherwise might have but little to do. It will strengthen greatly the Pastor, and safely and efficiently control the ecclesiastical and spiritual interests of the members.

There are cases, however, in which we should feel perfectly free, in advocating the ordination of Ruling Elders from among the blacks themselves. We do not design here to answer the arguments brought up in Synod about servants ruling, slaves in white Presbyteries, &c., &c. These are mere figments of the imagination, and do not deserve serious consideration. The only questions are.—Can the thing be done without violating our Constitution? And, are there exigencies which may demand such a procedure? To the former of these we reply, that it is certain that there are intelligent and pious negroes who may be trained so as to be qualified for the office of Ruling Elder. Why may not the Missionary instruct such men until their qualifications are suitable? *It can be done.*—Such negroes in the course of two years may be so trained, as to understand the doctrines and discipline of our church, as well as most white Elders. And inasmuch, as no church can be organized save by direction of Presbytery, let the Presbytery have such candidates examined *ad libitum*, and then ordain them. Here is every security against incompetency that any one can demand; and if under these circumstances the Missionary, by direction of Presbytery, shall ordain unsuitable persons, they must share the blame between them. This too is the plan, which the Rev. Mr. Wilson said, as he concluded his remarks in Synod, the Missionaries to Africa had determined to adopt. They found the negro character there, the same as it is here. To meet the case, they resolved to *train suitable men* for the office. Our domestic Missionaries can do the same thing. It should also be remembered, that these black Elders are to preside with their white Pastor over a congregation *of blacks.*—Now, we affirm what we know, when we say, that we have seen many a worthy Exhorter and Deacon among this people, as much respected by them, as white Elders are by white congregations.—And in what respect is the Confession of Faith violated in this transaction? Suitable, and in many respects the most suitable men possible, have been ordained over a congregation of blacks to whom

a Missionary had been sent, and all by order of Presbytery? The Constitution is not *touched*, but literally complied with by such a course.

But may there arise exigences demanding such a procedure? The writer admits, that in the separate organization of a church of blacks, it were preferable to have a white Session. Under this Session there might be appointed what the Apostle calls "*Helps*;" a few trust-worthy blacks, who have been *well trained*, and whose duty it should be to perform a number of less important offices directly among their fellow servants. This no doubt, is the *best organization* of all. But there may be localities in which a church of blacks *could not* have a Session of whites. Many Atlantic Islands—many large plantations in the South-West are just in this condition. The territory of slaves is large; that of the whites consists of a few overseers, and they not professing christian faith. What is a Missionary to do in this case? Suppose him to be resident on these Islands and Plantations. Is he to send some fifty miles for a white Elder every time he administers the Sacrament, admits a member or exercises discipline? Suppose, too, it be quite inconvenient for such an Elder to be present at these times? Is the Missionary to be left alone in his work, and the entire black population deprived of gospel ordinances simply for a *scruple* of Presbytery? It strikes my mind, that no Presbyterian minister, or but very few, would vote against the ordination of Ruling Elders from among the blacks in such a case as this. Why should a Presbytery hesitate? Does it consider such an office too high and sacred for a black man to hold? Does it apprehend that such Elders may 'usurp authority' over the whites, or contend for seats in Presbytery? Is it afraid of precedent; being itself the judge of the exigence in every case, and wielding all the power over such Elders and church? It has, and can have nothing to fear—nothing at all. The path of duty in this case in perfectly plain. Should an Elder prove insubordinate, he may be deposed and his office taken away. Should the Session of such a church pronounce a false judgment or commit any impropriety; its records are open for review—there is an appeal also to Presbytery; or the Session may even be arraigned before that body and tried. The whole power of controlling and guiding such a Session is in the hands of Presbytery. How then can it do harm? In no conceivable way whatever. Indeed, there is not a church organization on earth, so well adapted really to the condition of our

slave population as ours, provided *we introduce it and let it work.*—Of course, the Presbytery is in every instance the judge of an occurring exigence. Some cases may be supposed to be such that are not. Let the Presbytery determine each application according to its merits. But, to assume the ground that under no circumstances whatever, will such a permission be given, is what the writer trusts, no Presbytery will ever do. A different organization may be better—but such an organization is surely preferable to none or to one only in name.

And now, Brethren, I have finished my testimony and exhibited my views. Not so much the action of Synod, as the general tendency of that action has called forth these pages. Words are often idly thrown upon the air; but their impression on the mind may be permanent. Many of the younger members of Synod have paid this subject but little attention. The work of evangelizing the slaves is at best a very intricate and difficult one. As things now are, the blacks do and must value the full church organizations of others denominations, above the provision now made for them in our churches. Indeed, so little provision is made for them in many of our church edifices, that they are virtually excluded. Seeing thus but few attend his ministry; finding it difficult to reach them as he does the whites; the young Pastor is apt to give the work over altogether, and thus to surrender a most promising class of persons to the care of other denominations! This is the general state of things now in the South. The blacks for the most part, are given up by Presbyterians to any and every body who will care for them.* Hence we find them, in many cases, ignorant and fanatical; self-righteous and conceited—and sometimes insurrectionary and dissatisfied. Let us bring them under fuller instruction—let us subject them to a better form of government—let us organize them into regular congregations, subject to a white or mixed Session, as the case may require—let us, at any rate, do more, vastly more, for their salvation than has as yet been done.

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*See Note C.

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NOTE A.

It is exceedingly strange that while the church courts among Presbyterians refuse to admit black men to the subordinate rank of Elder, the Legislature of Georgia raises them to the far higher one of preacher! There are probably some hundred or more negroes in Georgia, whom the civil authorities annually license to occupy the pulpit! But Synod will not receive one of this class to even the bench of the Eldership!

NOTE B.

The origin of the Colored Presbyterian church in Macon is interesting. The parsonage was at the corner of a lot, and the Pastor's study exposed to the noise of two streets. Boat-hands and other negroes were in the habit of collecting, almost every sabbath morning, just under the windows of the study. Their conversation was not of course, very entertaining to the annoyed Pastor. Several times he stepped to a window to order them away. But, he was restrained by a voice within, which said; "Poor creatures; God has sent you here to remind me that you too have souls, and that I am sent to *you* also to preach the gospel." Within a few weeks he delivered to his people a most solemn discourse on the duty of masters to their servants. In this discourse, he maintained the position, that the first and highest duty of the master was, to make suitable provision for the religious instruction of his slaves. To forward the object of this discourse he announced a weekly lecture for blacks in the lecture-room. About two hundred were present the first evening. On succeeding evenings the room was filled. Just at this crisis, a black man was introduced to the Pastor by one of his fellows, as "Joseph Williams *the preacher*." Having but little confidence in Colored Preachers, the Pastor made it an object to keep Joseph for a time in the back-ground. The first prayer, however, heard from his lips, so completely overcame him, that he forthwith requested him to append an exhortation to the evening's lecture. He did so;

and with a dignity, force and wisdom, that caused the Pastor for the most part afterwards to give him precedence in this work. In a short time all the blacks in the city were moved to hear the new preacher. Several professed conversion and a few were baptized by the pastor. During the winter, the blacks were deprived of the lecture-room by the whites, and their "preacher" became a hearer in the white church. *This was a season of much earnest prayer.*—In Spring, the Session ordered the erection of a church edifice for colored persons, which was soon built and paid for. This church the Pastor dedicated; and in it under the joint-care of Joseph Williams and himself, he enjoyed some of the pleasantest seasons of his ministerial life.

NOTE C.

As the gallery-system offers but an insufficient accommodation for the blacks where they are numerous, the building of churches for them becomes a matter of grave and serious import. The question is; *Whose duty is it to erect such buildings?* The slaves are not able themselves to do this work, or to pay the white Pastor who teaches them. On whom does this responsibility devolve? Upon those denominations, some will say, whose faith the blacks have adopted. At present, these denominations are chiefly the Baptists and Methodists, especially the former. But is it right to give up some three millions of negroes to these denominations and to allow them to have all the expense and trouble of their evangelization? *It cannot be*—every denomination in the South should bear its part of this burden, both *in men and means.* The evil of neglecting this division of labor among the slaves is apparent. The number of churches erected will, like the galleries, be insufficient for their accommodation. This is the case now in almost all of our cities. In Richmond, Va. the African church numbers two thousand five hundred communicants! A church in Augusta, Ga. and another in Savannah, has not less than one thousand five hundred! What is the cause of this? The Rev. Mr. Manly of Richmond declares it to be, the *inability of the Baptist denomination to provide an adequate number of buildings.* See his article in the Watchman and Observer for December the second. Yes, it is a truth, that Presbyterian masters, *whose duty it is to provide for the religious instruction of their slaves*, have transferred this work to other denominations, furnishing them in the mean time with little or no means for the purpose! Why cannot *every Presbyterian church* in our

cities build an African church, and supply it also with a pastor? Most of them can; most of them *ought.* If our galleries have failed to answer the end contemplated, why not adopt another plan that will accomplish it? Do we complain of expense? This is no plea. Even one of our lofty steeples or large bells, or fine organs, would build an African church! Or, why not deduct from our costly walls and stained windows, a sum adequate to meet this expense? In Macon the colored church apart from the lot cost but six hundred dollars, and yet it accommodated some two hundred and fifty negroes comfortably. The church in Charleston built after the Gothic style, including a sabbath-school-room and lot, cost but seven thousand, seven hundred dollars. Why, there are many *individuals* in our wealthier congregations who could of themselves erect an African church. To all the members of a church the cost would be a trifle. The same is true as to the pastor's support. Let this arise, first of all, *from the slaves themselves.* Dr. Chalmers' West Port movement will furnish reasons for this. Then let the white congregation make up the balance. This too by right management, may be made an easy and pleasant work. As to men, there will be many young ministers who would even covet such a charge. We have then the field, the means, and the motive—what we lack is *the will.*